



Alison Green

Bywater American Bistro - New Orleans, Louisiana

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Interviewer: Rien Fertel

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Project: COVID-19 Oral History Project

[Start of Interview]

[00:00:00]

Rien Fertel: This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is June 22nd [2021], Tuesday afternoon, almost 3:00 p.m. I'm in New Orleans at Petite Clouet coffee shop in the Marigny. And this is round two of the Bywater American Bistro/COVID Oral History Project.

I'm sitting here with my friend Alison Green. Alison, can you say your name, introduce yourself, and maybe just tell me how you're doing? How's life?

[00:00:37]

Alison Green: Yeah. I'm Alison Green. I am doing great. It's been almost exactly a year—I think it's almost exactly a year since the last time we talked.

[00:00:47]

Rien Fertel: We talked in November. I checked.

[00:00:49]

Alison Green: November. Okay. Well, it's been a year since I've—

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Rien Fertel: It feels like a year.

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Alison Green: It feels like a year. [Laughs.] But it's been kind of crazy, because I have, in the last year, moved out of my apartment in the Bywater on Dauphine Street, and I've now recently, in the last month, returned to the same apartment.

[00:01:11]

Rien Fertel: So when I talked to you, we Zoomed. It was online. You were in Kentucky at your mother's house, I believe.

[00:01:20]

Alison Green: Yeah.

[00:01:21]

Rien Fertel: And you were—I read over the transcript this morning, and you were—you were unsure about a lot of things, if you could return to New Orleans, although you definitely had, I think, I think, kind of big emotional feelings about returning to New Orleans, because of your love for this place, but also kind of the economic feasibility of working in New Orleans, especially in the restaurant business.

[00:01:44]

Alison Green: Yeah.

[00:01:46]

Rien Fertel: Can you talk about how you made the decision to come back here?

[00:01:50]

Alison Green: It was very serendipitous. It was December. So I turned forty on Christmas Day, in December, and I was in Louisville, and my landlord had reached out to me from New Orleans, because I had been here around Thanksgiving, and my neighbor, one of my very good friends, basically had told her that I was here, so she reached out to see if I wanted to move back, and she was going to fix everything that was wrong in the apartment. It's very much one of those [laughs] do it yourself or just ignore it. But they were going to fix everything and then knock a couple hundred dollars off the rent, which I was already kind of getting a great deal, and I jumped at it.

That being said, I didn't move in until—I didn't start moving in until April, so I had many, many, many months after I made the commitment to do that, to kind of be in Louisville when things were reopening back up, and Louisville's a great place and I love it. I was seeing my friends there, which was really, really, really great, being with my mom. And so I started—I, honestly, was like, “Am I making the right choice?”

But as soon as I crossed over the bridge with the first big load of stuff I started crying. I was weeping in the rain. It was raining, and I'm crying, and I've got these two dogs and a U-Haul, and it was just—I pulled on to my block and there was a parking spot right out front, all—I know every single one of my neighbors, five deep in every direction, so seeing everybody, it just really confirmed that I'm home.

[00:03:39]

Rien Fertel: And I want to ask more about life in New Orleans, but I want to ask one more question before that, is you lived and worked in Chicago for a long time, and in our

interview, one thing really stuck out then when we talked, and again, today, when I reread the transcript, you talked about how even though living in Chicago is more expensive, living expenses, that you can, as a server, in the restaurant industry there, make your rent in one to three days. Something that you said is usually three days, you said, but even a really good day during the holidays, you can make it in a single day, a full months' rent. In New Orleans, that's impossible for most people in the restaurant industry. At least it sounds like you hadn't had that experience here. Did you consider moving back to Chicago at any point over the past year or the past six months?

[00:04:42]

Alison Green: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I was going back and forth to and from Chicago. As soon as I was back in Louisville—it's a four-and-a-half, five-hour drive—a friend of mine had—his dad had left his childhood home in Logan Square on Logan Boulevard, so my friend Brett was living at his parents' place, so I just had free rein of his apartment. So it felt—so I could go up there and kind of live there, and I love it there, I really do. But it's just—it's a hard place for dogs and I just—it's just a little bit—it's a grind. I'm telling you, some of the best people I know in my *life* live there, and it's always been—it's always going to be on the back burner. My friend Joe Flamm just opened a restaurant called Rose Mary that's just banging. As soon as I agreed to come back to New Orleans, I got a text from my gay husband in the service industry, and he was like, "Come work at Giant." So I was getting all these offers. That was the other thing about being like, "Am I making the right choice?" Because I'm getting offers for jobs where it's like six figures, and great restaurants with great chefs.

I don't know. It's like my heart really is here, and so much of the issue, too, it's not that the price point isn't right here or that people don't tip or that people don't spend money. It's the fact that you don't have four turns. At my old restaurant, we were busy at 4:30 and we didn't stop until 12:30, until you have four turns and you had hour-and-a-half turn times, and you just cranked it.

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Rien Fertel: So this is like turning the table four times in a shift, in an evening.

[00:06:35]

Alison Green: Yes.

[00:06:35]

Rien Fertel: And what is the average turn here?

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Alison Green: It's about the same, but what you'll notice, though, when I was working at BAB, at Bywater American Bistro, we'd have a couple of tables come in between 5:00 and 6:00, we'd have a full section by 6:30 to 8:30, and then we'd have a couple of tables, so you'd have sort of three rounds, but really just two complete rounds. Whereas Chicago, at 4:30, your whole section gets up, everybody has to be out by 6:00 o'clock to seat the 6:00 o'clock reservations, and then you just crank it.

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Rien Fertel: And is that part of the culture of eating in New Orleans, dining in New Orleans, just kind of longer—people just like to—

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Alison Green: Chill?

[00:07:24]

Rien Fertel: —spend more time, to chill at a table?

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Alison Green: Maybe. I think that's everywhere. I think the real difference is that people—it's restaurants here are closed at 9:00 o'clock, 10:00 o'clock, whereas we were open from 4:30 till 11:00 on the weekends. We might have been open till midnight. There's no way. There's no way. We were open till 11:00, but then 10:00 o'clock normal days. But again, people eat later there, so your rush—my rush is—in Louisville and Cincinnati and here are between 6:00 and 8:30. Chicago, you get a second push at 8:30 because everybody's going out afterwards. So you just have this whole other dining culture. It's a little bit more European like that, and even the Europeans who come in at—they've just taken a nap at 9:00 o'clock and are ready to party and start their day at 10:00.

[Laughs.]

[00:08:21]

Rien Fertel: So when you moved back down to New Orleans, did you—you're not working at BAB now. Did you consider going back? Was that an option?

[00:08:35]

Alison Green: No. It was funny, because evidently Larry [Miller, co-owner of BAB] had told our mutual friend Pableaux Johnson that I should come work for them again. I don't know if that's true. I don't know whether Pableaux is just—. I think they have—their staff is very small. With my side gig of the equestrian photography and just music, if that ever comes back, if I take a week or two off, it's a huge strain on the other six servers. And so that's a burden that definitely stressed me out when I was there, and I know it stressed my coworkers out. So I was kind of ready to leave when COVID happened. I'd actually put in my notice and then COVID happened. So I was kind of at that point.

I love the restaurant, though. I think if there was a little bit more flexibility, it would be a completely different ballgame, the convenience of just like working right down the street, I like all my coworkers, the management's great, Nina's [Compton, chef and co-owner] great, Larry's one of the funniest human beings you'll ever meet.

[Laughs.] So there is sort of a level of—I really appreciated my time there, but I think I'm excited for the next chapter.

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Rien Fertel: So where did you start working when you moved back?

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Alison Green: So I started working at Rosalita's, which started off in the alley between Piety and Desire, which is one of my all-time favorite metaphors, like physical metaphors of the city. But they finally opened their brick-and-mortar down on St. Claude, so I picked up over there, and slinging tacos is great. I like the investment of more of a fine dining pace. I feel like I can build more of a relationship and an experience for people. So I ended up interviewing and am going to start at Bayona, which is kind of a classic, thirty-year New Orleans spot that's right off Bourbon Street, but you wouldn't know it from the space. It's just—it's exciting. I've kind of had connections with Bayona, too, from before I even moved here. It's always kind of been like I should just go do that, which is kind of exciting to see what that looks like now.

[00:11:11]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, and it's kind of like a return to fine dining, you were telling me, that you haven't really—BAB is much more kind of casual dinner restaurant, mostly dinner restaurant. Can you talk about your feelings of that? You did fine dining in Chicago, fine dining as in white tablecloths, uniforms, higher price point, of course.

[00:11:42]

Alison Green: I had—okay. So I've actually never done—Herbsaint here was probably the closest to a traditional fine dining. That being said, one of the first—the first restaurant I worked at in Chicago was this place called Carnivale, which I may have talked about, and it was white tablecloths, and the space was *huge*, and it was just like

bright neon colors everywhere, nude kind of artistic photographs. It was a wild space, so it had high volume, but fine dining sort of quality, which is a total mindfuck.

So the thing I think is exciting about Bayona's is that it's a smaller space, it's a classic space. I've never worked at a restaurant in the Quarter, having that experience, so I think the service culture within the Quarter is very specific. I'm very curious about it.

[00:12:38]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[00:12:38]

Alison Green: Because you see so many people walking around in their aprons—there's like a pride to it, which I think has very kind of historically been that way, too, right?

[00:12:50]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah.

[00:12:51]

Alison Green: You probably know more about that than I do.

[00:12:53]

Rien Fertel: You define—yeah, I definitely recognize the servers who work in the Quarter by their uniform, but also you kind of—living close to the Quarter as we do, you

just kind of learn their faces over time. I think there is a pride in it. I think you're definitely right. Yeah, they're probably some of the better service gigs in town. They just have a constant influx of regulars and tourists, of course.

[00:13:32]

Alison Green: Yeah. And I think that's like one of the most interesting aspects of it, because on one hand, you have Galatoire's, which is very—one of the weirdest, strangest—I felt like I was being transported in time, was like having—I had lunch at Galatoire's with a friend, a restaurant friend of mine from Memphis who had connections, and so we had the—it was the Friday—I think it's the Friday lunch before Mardi Gras, like the big one, and everybody is just crammed in, because they just *cram* everybody, and it's kind of this little wild party atmosphere, but it's also like Galatoire's, and it was just—the lighting is—it's like the lighting is up with all the natural light pouring in. It was really interesting, and having that culture is just very much—I'm curious to see how contemporary Bayona's going to feel.

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Rien Fertel: Yeah. Tell me this. So from what I understand, since you put your notice in at BAB, which would have been February, March of last year, I don't believe you worked in any restaurants since, in the last eighteen of those months. So what does it feel like from a COVID-aspect, right? So we're still, some places, the employees are masked, some aren't, some, the customers are asked to wear masks, some aren't. Both at Rosalita

and, you're doing your first shift tomorrow at Bayona, how does it feel? How does it feel personally? Can you describe the rules of order at both places, as you understand them?

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Alison Green: Yeah. So at Rosalita's, we have a big plexiglass sort of sheet that hangs, makes it very hard to hear when people are giving you orders, so, I, honestly, will sometimes step aside.

With the vaccination program that happened in New Orleans, I got vaccinated in—let's see—mid-April, got my last one in mid-April, and everybody I knew who was in the service industry in New Orleans or anybody who wanted a vaccine was vaccinated before then even, because it was such a proactive vaccination campaign. So, for me, I feel very confident in medicine and what the CDC is saying, and so I feel very safe. It makes me nervous—I definitely don't want to spread the disease, so I—but my understanding is that it's pretty hard—you don't really carry a viral load.

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Rien Fertel: Right. Do you wear a mask at Rosalita by your choice or mandate from the—

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Alison Green: Not anymore, yeah, so nobody—no customer has to wear a mask. It's obviously their choice.

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Rien Fertel: Yeah. And that changed recently. I ate there right before I left on a big road trip in late April, it was still mandatory mask on both sides, so that's changed.

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Alison Green: It has, and everywhere. It's kind of wild the way the city is kind of coming back. In a way that is also—I think there were some big lessons to be learned through COVID that we as an industry should really hold on to. A lot of that is just having the self-respect. I've kind of come to terms with the fact that I view myself more as an independent contractor, where the restaurant doesn't necessarily hire me. They're contracting me for \$2.00 an hour, and I do the rest of the work on my own, in regards to learning the menu, staying on top of things, guests. And I think that sounds kind of cocky, but after having a year to think about it, I've made \$2.13 an hour, with the exception of Chicago, which went up to \$3.45. But that is what the restaurants have committed to pay me, and that backfires a lot with over—that's why you have these overstaffing issues, because you're not really losing any money to keep extra bodies to do cleaning, or to do whatever, because you're not losing money. So having that kind of self-respect, having the boundaries with guests I think is really important.

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Rien Fertel: That's, I think, really important to talk about.

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Alison Green: Guest experience is something—I always joke—I kind of view waiting tables as like casting a spell, and even when you're dropping a check, you don't break the spell.

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Rien Fertel: How is like casting a spell? What do you mean?

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Alison Green: So one of the things that you learn when you do this long enough is that you kind of have to go in strong with a show, almost, to capture the audience's attention, and then you actually are controlling the show. You're controlling the pace of your tables, you're controlling their experience. You can read so much from nonverbal cues. I can tell—I can anticipate from—if somebody drops something a block away, I will pay it—I see that because I've been in this industry so long. If I can tell someone's going to try to go behind me, then I move so that it allows more space for them. So the whole guest experience is about seeing everything and proactively adding to that experience and protecting that experience and protecting the timing. That's why it's like you don't—you never want there to be so many plates on a table that people get overwhelmed. That breaks the spell. If other servers come up and talk to me while I'm talking to somebody, that breaks the spell. I never want to talk about a table in front of them, even if it's, they're getting this bottle of wine. We can do that, because you don't break the spell.

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Rien Fertel: Yeah. And so how has that changed from before, from the before times, from before COVID?

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Alison Green: I think—

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Rien Fertel: Are you more—you led off, you said this is a lesson learned, but you knew about the spell before, right?

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Alison Green: Mm-hmm.

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Rien Fertel: So, are you more—is the spell more important? Are you more cynical about it? How does that work?

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Alison Green: I think it's as important as ever—

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Rien Fertel: Oh, okay.

[00:20:28]

Alison Green: —because we're rebuilding the trust of the public, and so, for instance even the optics of it. If I wash my hands but somebody comes in and I'm about ready to handle food or something, I wash my hands again so that they see me washing my hands. If I touch anything, I'm sanitizing it, and it's not because I feel judged, but it's because we, as a brand, are rebuilding the trust, and that's really important. So it's the optics. So much of that is—one thing I notice about hospitality that you see a lot in the younger generation—I hate to say that. That's not true.

There is a quality of people who are naturally good at hospitality, and one of those is jumping in—for instance, at Rosalita's, I had a situation where the computers went down and there was a line forming, and my coworker did not acknowledge the line forming. And so there's two of us back there, and the optics of that are not good, because even if the ship is sinking, go tell everybody the ship is sinking. Don't have people use their imagination as to what's going on. It's a very proactive service style that I learned in Chicago. And if you even have humor with it, you can get out of anything. You can throw a whole tray of drinks and food on people, and as long as you make it right and have the right attitude and make sure that everything is okay rather than running away, it's fine.

And I think there's a disconnect with a lot of the service that I see in New Orleans, but I think that's also just kind of the—there's a—I was talking to somebody the other day. I got my chops in chain restaurants, so, corporate. Uno's was really the main crank. And having the structure of corporate lineup, it's tried and true. I worked for Mitchell's Fish Market as well, which is a Cameron Mitchell restaurant. That was—their

slogan was it's like the milkshake rule. You have ice cream and you have milk, you can make a milkshake, even if it's not on the menu, which is really annoying. But that's an important thing, and you learn how to thrive in that sort of pace, and then you can become an artist. But you need the backbone of the skill set before [laughs] you can really flesh it out and make it cool.

[00:23:25]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. And what about changes that you hope to see, especially if you move back to a true kind of sit-down restaurant, server oriented, at Bayona? Yeah, what—you were talking about lessons, but what changes do you hope to see happen that existed before COVID?

[00:24:00]

Alison Green: I think I hope that, from a management standpoint, that the staff that you are paying \$2.00 an hour to build your brand with, because that's what we're doing, we're building and supporting a brand, and if you don't respect and nurture and care about those staff members, that brand is weak. And I think I've talked about this. Stephanie Izard, who I worked for in Chicago, is one of the best—everybody who works for her, you're treated with such respect and we were given—we were trusted in a way that it makes you trustworthy.

I was talking to a friend of mine—I won't say the restaurant, but they were talking about a restaurant within New Orleans and how this idea where you could throw out old cookies, day-old cookies, that you throw away all the cookies because the chef is convinced that the hosts and the bakers will conspire to have extra cookies, so then they can eat them, as opposed to just doing a par, like see how many cookies that you're selling, make that—do the managerial part rather than conspiracy theories.

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Rien Fertel: And villainizing the employees.

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Alison Green: Yeah, because when you start villainizing people they will rise to the occasion of being a villain.

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Rien Fertel: Yeah.

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Alison Green: If you don't trust somebody, they will be distrust—they will not be trustworthy. And I think that's a huge lesson, and I think part of the thing that I want the restaurant business to bloom into is this idea that every member of a restaurant is valuable. You can't run a successful restaurant without a badass dish washer, and if you don't have

a back waiter who can read between the lines, that sucks, because then you're having to repeat yourself. You're having to do things twice.

I would love to see a pay structure, somehow, where it's a living wage for everybody across the board. I have had—I'm a little bit on the fence about tip sharing, because if you're consistent—I'm consistently ringing four to five grand, another person's consistently ringing one to two because they don't know—they have no interest in learning about wine, so if somebody orders a glass of white wine, there's no follow-up questions, I don't think that's fair. If I can build the team and we've been in tip share with people I know who are great, I would do that in a heartbeat, like across the board, back of house. I've worked with some of the most badass polishers. Having somebody in a high-volume restaurant just polish glassware is a godsend. It's unbelievable. [Laughs.]

[00:27:20]

Rien Fertel: Which we don't think about.

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Alison Green: No. But you don't have a polisher one night, you feel it. [Laughs.] Like the unsung heroes, truly.

[00:27:33]

Rien Fertel: So, any other hopes or lessons or wishes for the future of the restaurant industry, whether you stay in it or not?

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Alison Green: I really hope that there is—I have to say I don't know. It's just a living, breathing thing. It's like I would love for there to be a true, fair pay structure overhaul, whether that means ringing up hourly, whether that means raising prices, which would have to be raise transparency. I think more transparency is always better. I think, as much as I talk about the spell, part of the spell is being really transparent, and you're not—

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Rien Fertel: Transparent about what exactly?

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Alison Green: Transparent about, like I said, if something goes wrong, you own it.

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Rien Fertel: Oh, okay.

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Alison Green: You know? If you mess—I always kind of tell people what I'm doing. I kind of give them a roadmap. My old analogy that I used to—Girl & the Goat was a shared plates restaurant, so my old spiel was it's basically like planning a road trip. "You figure out where you want to go and I'll figure out the route." And so it's kind of this exciting thing that you're doing. It's collaborative.

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Rien Fertel: With the customer.

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Alison Green: With the customer. And then from there—but before you even pull the trigger on that, then you’re like, “Okay, so this is what I have in mind.” Because then it sets up the anticipation of it, and if things go awry you address them. You don’t hide anything. If there’s a fly—if you see a fly in a glass before a guest does, you address the fly in the glass. [Laughs.] Like, you know?

And then so I am looking forward to getting back to the artistry of service, and I think one of my greatest fears is that COVID will have sapped some of that, because I think there are a lot of real artists who aren’t coming back to the industry, because they have found greener pastures otherwise other places, and—

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Rien Fertel: And you have friends who have left?

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Alison Green: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, and it’s heartbreaking, because these are the pros of the pros. They make me look like, I don’t know, working in a diner, a Waffle House diner, which, by the way, there’s great Waffle House diner servers. That’s the thing. I think it’s like finding—there’s so many different service styles. Rosalita’s has a badass, and it’s a totally different service style than what I thrive in, which is a different service style than a badass Waffle House. There’s badasses everywhere. I think there’s a

misconception in the restaurant business where it's like you work at a Bayona or you worked at a Galatoire's, that somehow you're a better server, and that's just not the case at all. Because it's finding your—where your service style—it's matchmaking. You're matchmaking with a guest trying to figure out a menu that they are going to want. You're matchmaking with the restaurant to see if you want to date that restaurant. It's all very much like a cohesive, breathing thing, which I love. And I don't think you can really kill it, and I don't think COVID is really going to affect that part, but I guess time will tell. I don't know.

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Rien Fertel: I think that's a good place to end, unless you want to add anything else.

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Alison Green: No, that was good.

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Rien Fertel: All right.

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Alison Green: Even just talking about that, because I haven't had the pep talks with myself, so just to have other people in the industry that I talk to, and it's—we talk about sports, like it's a sport. I would rather talk about—I will talk about a restaurant any day over a sports team, like passionately. I think I was talking to you about being the Scottie

Pippen. I want to be the Scottie Pippen of a restaurant. I would love to be a badass back waiter, but I think it's kind of—the egos, I could do away with the egos. [Laughs.] So, yeah.

[00:32:09]

Rien Fertel: All right. Well, thank you so much.

[00:32:10]

Alison Green: My pleasure. Thanks, Rien.

[End of Interview]